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**Understanding the Organization of Green Activism:
Sociological and Economic Perspectives**

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Introduction

Environmental activists have become an important voice in public and private politics, urging governmental and corporate responses and solutions to ongoing environmental damage.

Naturally, scholars have become increasingly interested in the impact of the environmental movement and on the influence of environmental activist organizations. This paper describes two literatures that have sought to explain the dynamics and outcomes of activism, one based in a sociological examination of social movements and the other in an economics-based approach to studying activist non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although the literatures often use different conceptual language and methodological tools they share the ambition of explaining the organizational infrastructure of activism.

We contend that both disciplinary camps have made important and nuanced insights into how environmental activism ‘works’, and how it is organized. Indeed this is an area of endeavor that is flourishing in both disciplines. Contributions have been theoretical and empirical. Scholars

working from the two perspectives have prioritized different themes, but they share a perspective of the activist as a purposeful and strategic actor. Significantly, there is a common respect for the ‘rational-actor’ model in this setting. This commonality has created scope for theoretical cross-fertilization between the two approaches. We contend that this potential is as yet under-exploited, and a closer connection and dialogue between the two traditions could substantially inform and enrich the insights from both.

In this essay, we highlight some of the similarities and differences, the particular strengths of each perspective, and elements where one stream of work could learn from closer examination of the other. While much has been achieved, much remains to be done, which makes this an exciting area for researchers. As we go along we point out research opportunities - what we believe would be exciting directions for future work.¹

We hope that the review should be interesting to scholars from both traditions, and those interested in engaging with developing the multi-disciplinary understanding of the role of green activist organizations. However it is important to be clear upfront what we do *not* do. In particular we make no attempt to provide an exhaustive ‘survey’ of the literature. The bibliography contains over 150 items - roughly equally split between the traditions - but inevitably leaves many things out. References are selected to exemplify a stream of work, to illustrate a point or to point the way to a fruitful research opportunity.

The tools of micro-economics (in particular game theory) are designed for the analysis of strategic interaction, and have been refined over decades for that purpose. They have proven potent in delivering insight into the ‘games’ played between activists and firms and (though to a lesser extent) *between* activist organizations. The theoretical economic treatment of green activism has mirrored quite closely, in spirit and in method, the industrial organization (IO) literature (for which Tirole (1989) remains a frequently-used summary). Many of the concepts and insights developed in industrial organization can and have been applied to understand the strategic choices made by activist groups and the firms that they face, albeit with the objectives

¹ In drawing attention to the topical overlap of the two fields of research, we follow a recent trend among scholars studying activism and nonmarket strategy to find opportunities for theoretical cross-pollination (see, for example, Briscoe, King, and Leitzinger, 2018).

and instruments of the actors adjusted. Some would say that the mathematical precision that use of such formal tools requires has come at the expense of ‘realism’ or dimensionality. Indeed this is a common critique of microeconomics in general. However, as we will show, economists have in fact gone a long way in providing compelling empirical motivation for the key assumptions embedded in these models. Doing more of this is important to ensure the relevance of these models and the conclusions drawn from them.

Sociological analysis has instinctively embraced the complexity of activist organizing – recognizing, for example, that individual activists are motivated to participate in collective action by both selective incentives as well as by the emotional and cultural appeal a social movement affords. And yet, despite sociology’s relatively inclusive conceptual approach, it shares with economic analysis an orientation of activists and their organizations as strategic and intendedly rational. The resource mobilization perspective, in particular, embraced a view of “movement actions [as] rational, adaptive responses to the costs and rewards of different lines of action” (Jenkins 1983: 528). The formal structures and tactics of social movement organizations reflect those rational pursuits.

Sociological discussion of social movements offers a breadth of concepts not yet incorporated in our standard economic treatments of NGOs, which provides an opportunity for economists. Robert Gibbons, the celebrated scholar of organizational economics, in his polemic “(W)hat is economic sociology and should any economists care?”² (Gibbons 2005) reflected that he became interested “... in the sociology literature when I recognized that sociologists were working with independent and dependent variables that were barely mentioned in the economics literature ... but seemed important” (page 4). In his setting, understanding how firms work, he uses social networks and vacancy chains as concepts that economists have adopted from much earlier sociological literature. Equally in understanding environmental activist organizations there are concepts about which sociologists have thought hard and seem likely to be important, but which barely feature in economic analysis. As Gibbons observes, these can be dependent (outcome) variables, or independent (explanatory) ones. Some examples might be; identity, legitimacy, ideology, radicalism and issue-salience. But their formalization in our economic models will

² He defines economic sociology to be the sociology of economic actors and institutions.

require a more precise statement of exactly what these things are, and how they ‘work’, than sociological analysis typically provides.

A notable strength of both the recent economics and sociological perspectives are that they are grounded in the empirical reality of activist organizations. The theoretical breadth of the latter allows it to cover a wide range of topics. But a negative consequence of this breadth is that sociological theories about activism lack the precision that is often a feature of economic analysis. For example, sociologists put weight on concepts, such as identity, that cannot easily be measured and that may be operationalized quite differently depending on the context. Sociologists are often reticent to use mathematical models, which has made it difficult for sociologists to develop theory in a systematic way. The discipline of formal modeling methods in economics allows the modeler to develop rather precise insights conditional on assumptions, insights that would not have been discernible without the formalism. As we move to improve both our breadth and depth of understanding we believe that the two disciplines have much to contribute to one another without losing what makes each special.³

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We begin in Section 1 with a discussion of how each discipline defines and conceptualizes activism and discuss the unique role that organizations play in environmental activism. In Section 2 we discuss the purpose of environmental activist organizations. What do they do? Why? And who decides? In Section 3 we turn to the question of how researchers from the two disciplines have thought about the tactics that such organizations might use in pursuit of their ends. Section 4 explores the notion of competition and collaboration among activist organizations. Relatedly in Section 5 we overview how scholars have thought about the birth and survival of this sort of organization. In Section 6 touch on progress that needs to be made in understanding the collaborative partnerships between NGOs and corporations that have become increasingly popular in practice recently. Section 7 concludes. In each part we contrast the perspectives from sociology and economics. This will also sometimes be reflected in differences in terminology. In particular when moving between

³ In addition to the breadth versus rigor distinction that we will emphasize, a referee from this journal has pointed out that while the study of social movements is of interest in and of itself to sociologists, NGOs are typically of interest to economists only to the extent that they produce impact (utility directly to members, indirect impacts on others through spillovers from member actions).

sociological and economic perspectives we will refer to social movement organizations (SMOs) and NGOs, reflecting differences in common usage in the two disciplines.⁴

1. Conceptualizing the Organization of Environmental Activism: SMOs and Activist NGOs

Sociologists conceive of social movements as collective action organized for the purpose of creating societal or political changes (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004). Collective action often publicly materializes in the form of protests, marches, activist campaigns, or voter mobilization. Much interest among sociologists and political scientists in social movements stemmed from the spike of protest movements on college campuses and elsewhere associated with the civil rights and peace movements in the 1960s. Graduate scholars interested in social movements in the 1960s began to depart dramatically from their scholarly mentors in how they conceived of movements. Whereas scholars in the 1950s and 1960s saw movements as spontaneous and irrational expressions of collective emotions, the scholars who came of age in the 1960s embraced a theoretical view that prioritizes the rational, strategic, and purpose-driven aspects of movements (Weber and King 2014). Social movements, they contended, are rational reactions to perceived injustices and grievances.

SMOs are the building blocks and engines of any sustained social movement. McCarthy and Zald's (1977: 1218) classic formulation of resource mobilization theory – one of the foremost perspectives on social movements over the last 40 years – conceives of an SMO as “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement...and attempts to implement those goals.” McCarthy and Zald were fairly agnostic about which types of organizations ought to be categorized as SMOs. As long as those organizations oriented themselves toward the movement's purposes and provided resources toward the progress of the movement, we ought to treat them analytically as SMOs. Thus, churches and community organizations receive equal treatment to more professionalized organizations, like NGOs.

⁴ For current purposes we use NGOs to refer to activist NGOs that seek to influence political or market outcomes. There are many NGOs that are primarily in the business of supplying public goods directly. Yaziji and Doh (2009) provide a helpful categorization of NGO types.

The role of SMOs in movements is to mobilize the resources needed to sustain movements, including human and material resources. In addition, SMOs provide vital planning and strategic input to the direction that movements take. Although marches, protests, or boycotts may appear to the public as fairly spontaneous events, in most cases they are highly organized, with SMOs operating behind the scenes as coordinators of the action. For example, many of the 1960s civil rights boycotts and sit-in campaigns were organized by a combination of national civil rights organizations – like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – and local black churches (Morris 1981).

Of course, a major resource mobilization function of SMOs is to recruit new participants into a movement and to provide ways for them to express themselves. McCarthy and Zald (1977) thought of the person-organization pipeline as central to the analysis of movements. Movements, they argued, consist of many adherents who support a movement's goals, but it is up to SMOs to convert those individuals into constituents who provide resources for the movement. Thus, SMOs seek to increase participation in movements through consciousness-raising and other activities that draw sympathetic but inert individuals into collective action. A good example of an SMO's efforts to enhance participation in a movement is the regular efforts by activist groups to recruit college students, who may have an ideological affinity with a movement but have not previously been politically active (McAdam 1986; Hirsch 1990).

Most existing economic treatments of organized environmental pressure have been theoretical in nature though an exciting and fruitful empirical strand has developed more recently. As we have already noted, the tools of formal game theory are applied in the tradition of IO.⁵ While IO scholars interest themselves in the strategic interactions between profit-motivated firms, NGO theorists have developed a series of models that throw light on the ways in which an activist NGO 'should' act in pursuit of environmental objectives. The tools are powerful and provide fine-grained insights into NGO behavior, at least within the confines of a particular set of

⁵ Indeed some of the most distinguished contributors to this line of work have themselves had parallel or previous 'careers' as IO theorists – David Baron, who made influential contributions to both strands of work, is an obvious example.

modeling parameters. Such analyses also provide concrete testable hypotheses that empirical researchers can interrogate.

In most economic analyses the objective function that the NGO aims to maximize is something chosen by the model builder, as are the instruments to which they have access, and relaxing this should be an ambition going forward. The economic approach does not necessarily fit comfortably with the notion of a social movement, emerging organically from the correlated actions or tastes of diverse individuals. While individuals play important roles in the typical economic model of an activist NGO they usually treated as agents and the NGO as principal. For example donors need to be induced to give money (Aldashev and Verdier 2010), or consumers to be motivated to comply with a boycott (Innes 2006), etc., by an NGO the objectives of which are prescribed and which is implicitly or explicitly assumed controlled by a single, rational controlling mind. Consistent with the ‘bottom up’ emergence of social pressure groupings further consideration of agency problems both within NGOs, and between NGOs and their external stakeholders (such as donors) would be a fruitful area for further exploration.⁶ Just as in the IO analysis of firms, a full-fledged characterization of an activist NGO should allow for the multiple minds with conflicting intentions that coexist within organizations. In principal-agency theory economists have the perfect tool to analyze how such intra-organizational tensions can play out, and their implications for NGO behavior.

Notions such as legitimacy or identity - important concepts to sociologists working in this area - have received little attention from economists working on NGOs, so could provide fertile ground for collaboration in future. In the case of identity it is not that economics in general has shown no appetite for thinking about the role that it might play in driving behavior. George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton’s 2000 paper “Economics and Identity” (Akerlof and Kranton 2000) has, at time of writing, garnered 4519 Google Scholar citations. We will return to discussion of identity below.

2. Purpose

⁶ For one example of a paper that thinks about things in these terms see Heyes and Oestreich (2017).

Individuals are more likely to participate in a movement and become an active constituent of an SMO if they perceive that the movement's purposes are aligned with their own. Purpose binds individuals to organizations. For activist groups, purpose is conveyed in several ways. The most evident are goals and identity. However one can also conceive of choice of tactics as a third way in which an organization communicates its purpose. Some groups are willing to pursue violent tactics in pursuit of environmental aims, which has an important influence on who is willing to support them.

SMOs often have stated goals that clarify their purpose. Although movements may not always have clearly expressed goals, SMOs, by contrast, seek to be explicit in communicating their objectives. SMOs' goals may relate to legislative change, cultural transformations, or economic attainment. Their goals shape SMOs' strategies and have a downstream impact on other choices, such as the kinds of tactics the organization will use (Ganz 2000; Andrews et al. 2010).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of an SMO is its goal. Within a single movement, SMOs may vary dramatically in the kinds of goals they embrace (Kriesi 1996). For example, consider SMOs operating within the environmental movement. Even though the movement may share a broad agenda to protect the environment from human intrusion and destruction, environmental SMOs may choose quite different objectives, which ultimately shape their orientation to their constituents. Greenpeace seeks to "expose global environmental problems and promote solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future."⁷ 350.org's goals are more clearly articulated as "to oppose new coal, oil and gas projects, take money out of the companies that are heating up the planet, and build 100% clean energy solutions that work for all."⁸ Although the two organizations' goals are compatible, they will appeal differently to certain individuals.

Sociologists maintain that another way in which an SMO's purpose is conveyed is through its identity. An SMO may be able to help an individual augment his or her own personal identity – answering the question, what kind of a person am I? Groups, communities, and organizations all

⁷ <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/about/>

⁸ <https://350.org/about/>

develop collective identities inasmuch as individuals feel emotionally and socially connected to a “broader community” in which they perceive a “shared status or relation” (Jasper and Polletta 2001). Collective identities are not simply aggregations of individual identities, but rather they evolve from their members’ shared experiences and interactions (Taylor and Whittier 1992). They are emergent properties of communities and organizations. Once formed, these collective identities provide shared meaning for their members, that can include believing in a shared ideology and defining who both belongs to the organization and who does not. In fact, creating an out-group – or even a potential enemy – sharpens an SMO’s identity (Whittier 1997). For the organization, collective identity binds individuals to the organizations and facilitates a unity of voice and action.

Both goals and identities are actively and strategically communicated by organizations in an effort to recruit, mobilize, and retain movement constituents. Collective action framing is the process of strategically communicating ideas so as to create appealing messages that assist in mobilizing movement participation (Benford and Snow 2000). Frames ideally enable SMOs to create cultural resonance of its goals with its adherents. To create a culturally resonant frame, an SMO may tap into pre-existing beliefs – known as master frames – that people have about the way the world works or should work and then aligning those beliefs with a movement’s goals (Snow 2004). For example, an SMO committed to improving the environmental conditions of disadvantaged communities may draw on people’s innate beliefs about social justice and fairness. In using frames SMOs reinforce and potentially construct new collective identities (Hunt et al. 1994). As a particular frame shapes what it means to be associated with an SMO, members come to see themselves and their organization in a new light. For example, inasmuch as an SMO uses a social justice frame, members of the organization begin to see themselves as the types of environmentalists who stand up for the disadvantaged in society.

Identity is a core concept for sociologists, but economics has also begun to incorporate the concept of identity in formal modeling. Akerlof and Kranton (2000) is probably the best-known attempt to explore how the role of identity - a person’s sense of self - affects economic outcomes more generally. They propose a utility function in which “... identity is associated with different social categories and how people in these categories *should* behave” (page 715). They construct

a game-theoretic model showing how identity can affect individual outcomes, and that taking account of identity can cause conclusions to diverge significantly from those derived from models that ignore it.⁹ Gibbons (2005) notes that “As Akerlof and Kranton recognize, once we contemplate identity as a complement to the standard economic model of single-person decision making, several questions naturally arise, including: when is decision making governed by the standard model versus identity (the “logic of consequences” versus the “logic of appropriateness”); how do others perceive our identity; and how do we attempt to influence these perceptions by others.” (Gibbons 2005, page 5). Such considerations are particularly pertinent in thinking about people’s involvement in green initiatives including NGO support (but also green lifestyle behaviors, and so on), such that embedding them in models of NGO activism could deliver significant extra realism and traction. But such an agenda is not just about ‘correcting’ economics - the economist’s demand for precision can encourage sociologists to sharpen up their definitions and arguments. What *precisely* do we mean by identity in this context? And what does it *do*?

Game theoretic economic models of NGO behavior apply methods of constrained optimization. As already noted the NGO is in most cases *endowed* with an objective function – what the NGO is trying to achieve - and a choice set, a description of the instruments available to them for use in pursuit of that objective. The objective function is defined precisely and (in almost all cases) single-dimensional. The task of the modeler is to characterize how the NGO can best apply those instruments to maximize or minimize the objective function. Regardless of internal politics, factions, etc., the NGO acts “as if” operated by a single controlling mind. The formal methods discipline the modeler to be explicit in the assumptions that she is making.

Various objective functions have been adopted, and understanding how differences in objectives feed through into differences in activist behavior is an important strand of work. The activist NGO may seek to maximize environmental protection (for example Heyes and Rickman (1999)) or – most popular – maximize the impact of its own program. The latter is an organizational

⁹ One application of such a concept in environmental economics (not involving NGOs) is Heyes (2001), in which he considers the role of a pollution tax in a world in which some agents are innately ‘honest’, and so truthfully report their emissions levels, where others make strategic reporting decisions based on an assessment of the financial costs and benefits of misreports.

analogue to the warm glow preferences attributed to individuals by Andreoni (1989), and applied to philanthropy in Andreoni (2006). A donor with such preferences does not simply want to see the environment protected, but wants his or her *own* contribution to have done the protecting. The concept has been applied to charitable activities more generally by Duncan (2004) in his ‘theory of impact philanthropy’ and by Scharf (2014) who has modeled the socially inefficient choices made by such ‘warm glow’ organizations. An organization focused only on outcomes resulting directly from its own programs and activities clearly might diverge in behavior from one that has an interest in outcomes more generally. In a single NGO setting the distinction may be unimportant, but as we move to thinking about the NGO sector it can be expected to matter. We are used to this way of thinking when studying firms. A firm is motivated by own profits, and attaches no weight to the profits of others in the industry. But such a mindset (arguably) fits less comfortably in the study of environmental non-profits: Are WWF stakeholders really indifferent to a whale saved if that whale is saved by Greenpeace?

Other models have assumed that revenue is valued by NGO managers not simply as a means to end, but rather as an end in itself. In her influential early paper, for example, Rose-Ackerman (1982) assumed that maximizing total donations was the objective of an NGO. In such a world it competing NGOs will devote too much effort to fighting with each other over an inelastic pot of funds, rather than delivering social or environmental impact – a result that she formalized. The only constraint on all funds being devoted to the raising of further funds is that discerning donors might balk at an NGO acting in such a way and be less likely to support it. Such a view leads us to think of NGO objectives as themselves projections of the donors and supporters on whose behalf they purport to work. But then in addition to the issues with which they engage NGOs may vary in *how they go* about delivering impact and donors may have preferences among those *modi operandi*. This is an area that we believe has been under-explored, and there is scope for fruitful empirical and theoretical research.

Rose-Ackerman (1982) conceived of NGOs scattered within an ideological space, with closely co-located NGOs having similar ‘ideologies’. Ideology is left abstract, it provides a dimension along which donors are arrayed and could equally capture social issue, method, or some combination. The construct arrays donors along a line and allows the author to then import the

well-developed techniques used by IO theorists to model horizontal competition (indeed the concept of attachment to ideology among donors here is essentially the same as the notion of the brand loyalty or locational preferences of consumers in spatial models of monopolistic competition). Social theorists might find such a mechanical representation of a concept as nuanced and multi-dimensional as ideology difficult to engage with, but the approach allows for the application of an established set of spatial modeling tools and sharpness of results. Aldashev and Verdier (2010) have a similar approach: “Donors, in choosing an NGO, act as if they care not simply about outcomes, but also about the way such outcomes are delivered. In other words they have a ‘procedural utility’ component.” (Aldashev and Verdier (2010: 51)). In one of very few attempts to assess empirically what it is that NGOs optimize Okten and Weisbrod (2000) provide persuasive evidence that budget maximization does not fit well with observed behaviors, they have a mission which weighs concrete social outcomes.

Heyes and Martin (2015) attempt to endogenize NGO mission, which they define to be the set of social or environmental issues that an NGO regards as within its operational territory. The model is again a spatial one, with the set of possible environmental issues arrayed around the perimeter of a circle. The approach draws from industrial organization where ‘Salop’s circle’ (Salop, 1979). Analytically a circle has properties that make it nice to work with (in particular by having no ends it avoids the problems associated with modeling on a line) and is a standard tool used to think about horizontally differentiated products (brands). In choosing how wide a set of issues to include in its mission statement an NGO faces a trade-off. Being ‘wide’ in its interests – like a WWF or a Greenpeace, interested in a large number of different environmental issues – the impact-motivated but issue-indifferent NGO designer increases the likelihood of finding high-impact projects to which to allocate funds. But being too wide means that prospective supporters find it hard to know how their donations would be directed, and if they have preferences over issues – as the model assumes they do – will be turned off by an organization that is too unfocussed. The authors show that there is a critical width of organization at which those two opposing considerations come into balance, and that is the width that the NGO designer will seek.

Rigorous empirical investigation of the effective (as distinct from fiat) objective functions of green NGO, recognizing that those may diverge from stated objectives, remains an important ambition for researchers and provides exciting opportunities. Doing this in a compelling way will be challenging. Economists use both revealed preference and stated preference approaches to estimate preferences in other contexts, and potentially either could be exploited here (as noted, Okten and Weisbrod (2000) is an attempt to use the former).¹⁰ Of course throughout the study of NGOs in these models the financing constraint is a central consideration. An NGO cannot function without support (money, volunteer time, etc.), so an NGO with particular motivation typically faces a constrained optimization problem.¹¹

3. Tactics

Sociologists highlight that another distinguishing feature of SMOs is the kind of tactics they use to accomplish their purposes. Tactics, like protests, marches, or creating social media memes, are public and collective activities that express an SMO's purpose and align with their strategy for accomplishing that purpose. The public often remembers social movements for the types of tactics they use, and for this reason certain tactics, like protests, have become highly associated with movements.

In reality, SMOs vary in the kinds of tactics they know how to use. Scholars refer to the mix of tactics that any SMO uses as its *tactical repertoire* (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). Some SMOs use a broad range of tactics, including overtly political tactics like lobbying while also using direct action techniques aimed at consciousness- and awareness-raising. In contrast, other SMOs

¹⁰ Analogously for a public bureaucracy a very insightful example of trying to uncover the 'true' objectives of state-level EPA's in the United States by observing their enforcement choices is provided by Helland (1998). He finds that short-term budgetary concerns influence the decision to inspect, while political factors determine, in part, the stringency of penalties. Other papers along related lines include McFadden (1975) and Hiatt and Park (2013). The approaches used in uncovering the objectives of public bureaucracies could form the basis for a similar line of work relating to activist groups.

¹¹ How donors choose between NGOs that compete for their donations is a fascinating and important question. The emergence of NGO 'raters' further complicates and enriches the setting, and opens up new interdependences and research possibilities. One attempt to understand some of this empirically is provided by Grant and Potoski (2015). They show that ratings by third-party evaluators *Charity Navigator* impact donations to those nonprofits. Intriguingly evidence points to the mechanism being through induced changes in fundraising choices rather than donor reactions. They also find evidence of collective reputation among groups of nonprofits performing similar functions in the same geographical region.

use a narrow set of tactics or may even specialize in using one particular kind of tactic, like boycotts. Sociologists refer to the former types of SMOs as generalists and to latter type of SMOs as specialists (King and Cornwall 2005; Soule and King 2008).

Tactical repertoires are like other forms of organizational culture in that they are passed on internally from leaders to constituents, reinforced through routines, and become infused with value beyond their functional purpose. For this reason, tactics become strongly associated with an SMO's identity and culture (Minkoff 1994; Clemens 1997). Women suffragist organizations in the 19th Century developed a tactical repertoire that was consistent with the culture of femininity at that time, which could be repurposed for political ends (Clemens 1997), but over time certain suffragists learned how to use new tactics, such as the suffrage parade, which helped radicalize the identities of those SMOs (McCammon 2003).

One question that social movement scholars have considered is how do SMOs acquire new tactics? SMOs appear to adapt their tactics to the circumstances they face, doubling down on current tactics when they get the desired results and innovating when the current set of tactics loses its effectiveness (King and Cornwall 2005). Tactical innovation is often spurred by the ability of an SMO's target to neutralize a currently used tactic, as was the case when local police forces in the South found ways to mute Civil Rights activists (McAdam 1983). Another way in which SMOs acquire new tactics is by learning through experience with others. Tactics tend to diffuse from one SMO to another as they collaborate, form partnerships, and observe distant successes (Soule 1997; Wang and Soule 2012). Tactical diffusion, likewise, helps create opportunities for future collaboration between SMOs.

While there are exceptions, most formal economic models of NGOs have treated instruments one at a time. As such a really fascinating question is: What is the equilibrium mix of tactics that an NGO will use? Answering such a question requires thinking about the complementarity or otherwise *between* instruments and how differently *combined* approaches can be used by an NGO to advance its aims. Some progress has been made along these lines. For example Baron (2011) allows for both creation of an ecolabel and use of social pressure to drive consumers to it, while Baron (2012) allows for both campaigning attacks and NGO/firm partnerships.

Nevertheless, the question of hybrid-instruments and tactic combinations remains underexplored, and offers rich possibilities for theoretical and empirical research in the future.

The instruments with which NGOs have been assumed to have access vary across the literature, and space precludes a detailed survey of them. In their detailed literature review Heyes and Urban (2016) categorize the roles fourfold, NGOs acting as (1) lobbyists, (2) mobilizers, (3) litigators and (4) information providers, and this provides a simply compartmentalization for us (see Figure 1).

In (1) NGOs lobby governments or regulators through formal, public political channels (for examples Conconi (2003), Damania (2001) and Heyes (1997)). As mobilizers NGOs play a role in putting together an action such as a boycott of a product or firm (for example Innes (2006))¹². As litigators the NGO intervenes through legal channels (Heyes and Rickman (2009), Hurley and Shogren (1997), etc.). The strategic use of information provision by NGOs represents probably the largest strand of literature, and we will return to discuss that in more detail below. Understanding in more detail *why* NGOs choose the instruments that they do is important. There is some discussion of this in Baron and Diermeier (2007) who analyze the mechanics of both rewards to green firms, and punishment of brown firms, and show that NGOs may in general have a preference for the latter.

Much of the most influential research in recent years, including Baron and Diermeier (2007), falls into the study of what has come to be known as ‘private politics,’ “a new regulatory mechanism [that] does not operate through public institutions. Instead, it is characterized by the interaction of private entities, firms and activist NGOs, where activists target firms through a corporate campaign to induce firms to change their business practices” (Abito et al (2015: 1)).

The phrase private politics was coined (at least in the economics literature) in the wide-ranging essay entitled “Private Politics” published as Baron (2003). While the model presented there is

¹² Innes (2006) also provides some useful analysis of the strategic considerations that can be expected to inform and NGOs choice of target. When a boycott arises in his model, it is either a small persistent boycott against a ‘small firm’ in the industry, or a large transitory boycott against the ‘large firm’ in the industry that prompts the target firm to accede to the boycott demands quickly.

sparse, subsequent work both by the same author and others has made significant strides in fleshing out some of the details of the micro-structure of the model. Notably Baron and Diermeier (2007) develop a theory of strategic activism and the way in which they black box the tactics of activists is not unusual in this literature. An NGO approaches a firm, makes a demand denoted x_D , offers a reward r for acquiescence and threatens harm h in the event of non-acquiescence. A ‘campaign strategy’ for the NGO consists, then, of a triple (x_D, r, h) to which the NGO is assumed able to credibly commit, which can be interpreted as a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the target firm. Little micro-structure is placed around the form that the various elements of the triple take, nor from where the NGO acquires threat credibility (what incentive would the NGO have to follow through on a costly punishment exercise if the firm were to call its bluff and ignore the offer?) But the model provides a sparse setting within which a wide set of insights can be derived, for example about choice of targets (in the multiple polluter variant of the model), and the relative merits of ‘sticks’ (attacking recalcitrant firms, r) and ‘carrots’ (being nice to acquiescent ones, h). The authors argue the generic campaign formulation can nest within it a wide set of potential tactics as special cases.

Information-based tactics - the potential for NGOs to influence market outcomes, and incentives for pro-social behavior by firms, through the strategic release or non-release of information – have been studied in greater detail by economists than any other set of instruments. In part this reflects the frequency with which NGOs exploit such tactics in various guises real world settings. These include labeling schemes and certification of other sorts, league tables of good and badly performing firms, leafleting campaigns against target firms. In part it may also reflect a disciplinary supply side effect. Modeling of market situations involving hidden action (moral hazard) and hidden type (adverse selection) are the bread and butter of industrial organization theorists, and indeed microeconomics more generally (for example such models occupy more than half of the pages of Tirole (1989)). This is how economists are used to thinking about strategic interaction, and have a well-established toolkit for so doing.

The intended recipient of information diffused by an NGO may be an investor, firm employee, local citizen or others able to influence the social comportment of firms, but the usual targets are consumers. In their classic analysis of ‘retailing public goods’ Besley and Ghatak (2007)

characterize how firms will wish to ‘bundle’ public good contributions with private goods when selling to socially-motivated consumers who are able to discern the amount of public good so embodied. In many or most cases, of course, the social attributes that a particular product embodies, and which consumers care about, are ‘credence characteristics’ – that is to say characteristics of the product that the consumer is typically unable to discern, even after consumption (Tirole 1999). Absent credible information there is no way for a consumer to know whether a particular chocolate bar is made with cocoa from farms that employ slave labor, and buying and eating a chocolate bar does not reveal any further insight. In a model of hidden action, where the firm can choose the social characteristics, there is little incentive for a firm to do anything other than adopt least cost practices (poor labor and environmental practices, ‘unfair’ trade with supplies, and so on). Any other approach would impose additional costs, and even if consumers would be willing to pay a premium for a more socially responsibly produced alternative there would be no credible way for the firm to communicate its extra efforts to those consumers.

In many markets this provides substantial opportunity for NGOs to influence both consumer behavior and, by extension, incentives facing firms, by act as providers of information. By auditing or otherwise gathering information about the practices of firms and communicate that to consumers. The most obvious way is through the green label programs that are now commonplace in the modern retail landscape (see Cashore (2004) for an excellent analysis of labeling in the context of forest products). A large literature has evolved exploring how NGOs can best design and manage such schemes to further their agendas. For examples, Amacher et al (2004), Roe and Sheldon (2007), Bottega and De Freitas (2009), Heyes and Maxwell (2004), Fischer and Lyon (2015) and Harbaugh et al (2011). While each of these contributions derive from vertical quality models, in other words the social issue at stake is predetermined and the certifier makes a decision only as to the stringency of the requirement for award of a label, Heyes and Martin (2017) extend into a general spatial setting that casts light both on what gets labeled, and how challenging are labeling standards. The various contributions to this line of inquiry vary in the extent to which the NGO is explicitly assumed to be sincere (that is, when an NGO says something it is necessarily true), or must earn credibility in the eyes of consumers, with the former being the preferred assumption.

While in a labeling setting the NGO sets the qualifying standard that a firm must achieve in order to be able to carry the endorsement on its products a similar but distinct role is played by the activist in a model of endorsement of the sort put forward by Feddersen and Gilligan (2001). In their model with some probability the activist learns about the technology being used by a particular firm ('good' or 'bad') and then can choose to broadcast a 'message' about what it has learned. Consumers are sophisticated in the extent to which they are persuaded by such messaging - they are skeptics, and understand that the activist has her own interests to promote. They find that the existence of the activist can improve welfare and environmental outcomes in the market, inducing a switch by one or both firms (there is a model with two *ex ante* symmetric firms) from bad to good production practices. Interestingly in their set-up the NGO will refrain from endorsing two firms - even if they know both to be green - as this would stimulate overall market demand.

Two somewhat different contributions to understanding the way in which NGOs might manipulate information to their advantage are provided by Lyon and Maxwell (2011) and Heyes et al (2017). Lyon and Maxwell provide the first analytical model of the greenwash – misleading claims by firms as to their social or environmental credentials – in a setting in which an activist has the opportunity to audit the firm's claims. The audit policy of the NGO can influence the incentives for firms to mislead the public in the first place, in a setting in which motivated consumers dislike both brown firms but, in particular, *hypocritical* firms. Heyes, Lyon and Martin (2018) develop a model in which public attention is limited. Citizens can only attend to a limited set of issues at once such that issues, environmental and other, have to compete for attention or 'salience'. The activist NGO in their model will adjust its strategies in order to try to keep the issues of interest to it 'in the public eye', since when salient fund-raising is easier.

In an interesting recent contribution - inspired by the case study evidence presented by Oreskes and Conway (2014) in their well-known book *Merchants of Doubt* - Chiroleu-Assouline and Lyon (2016) formalize the way in which an industry-backed group can undermine the credibility of NGO advice. The first tactic does not require supplying competing and credible scientific evidence itself, but rather by 'smearing' the reputation of the NGO. By creating the belief that it

(the NGO) is an extremist entity the industry-backed group can reduce the weight that policymakers and society attach to its pronouncements. The second tactic is to create think tanks that offer their own, strategically-biased, versions of science.¹³ When facing a sophisticated (Bayesian) audience, Chiroleu-Assouline and Lyon (2016) explore the circumstances in which each tactic can be effectively employed.

We have already noted that sociologists attach substantial weight to the role of activists in *framing* environmental debates, and recent advances in information-theoretic modeling provide tools for economic analysis could deliver further insight. For example, intriguing is the recent work on ‘competitive framing’ of Spiegler (2014). That model, from the IO tradition and focused on purely private goods, has firms sending costless marketing messages to ‘frame-dependent’ consumers. This diverges from most of the contributions described above in allowing for explicitly behavioral agents - non-rational when compared to the usual benchmark of *homo economicus* - as distinct from agents who are rational but imperfectly informed.¹⁴ They find that in an otherwise competitive market firms can manipulate consumer behavior by using marketing to create frames and, interestingly, the extent to which consumers will be subject to manipulation in equilibrium is itself sensitive to the degree of competition in the market. It is straight-forward to think that NGOs may compete both with other NGOs, and with polluting firms, to provide the frame within which consumers, and the citizenry more generally, think about environmental issues.

In Baron (2012) an activist chooses between a confrontational approach to dealing with a polluting firm and a cooperative one. In the former the NGO makes demands of a firm and implements a damaging campaign against it in the event of non-acquiescence. In the latter a target firm is uncertain about the private benefits it will derive from implementing cleaner practices, and can only discover the true value of those benefits through an engagement with a

¹³ The role of informational lobbying is further complicated when, as for example in Lyon and Maxwell (2004), a firm can covertly subsidize a group to lobby when it normally would not (so called ‘astroturfing’) or simply pay a special interest group to alter its lobbying choices (the ‘bear hug’).

¹⁴ The exception is the treatment of salience in Heyes et al (2017) which is explicitly behavioral. The work on competitive framing is closely related to that on obfuscation in strategic situations (see for example Spiegler (2006)) and the competitive ‘shrouding’ of product attributes (Gabaix and Laibson 2006).

cooperative activist. Baron considers the outcomes obtained by one sort of activist over another, and also how the activities of one might also influence the efficacy of the other. For example he notes that - at least within the confines of his model - a successful engagement with a cooperative activist would provide an effective “shield” against being targeted by a confrontational one. He derives conditions under which both of two activists choose confrontation or cooperation, and when the outcome is mixed.

Interestingly in light of our earlier discussion about the gains to use of instruments in combination, Baron notes that in practice some activist organizations have developed both cooperative and confrontational capabilities. He cites Greenpeace as an example, and though he does not speak to such entities analytically he provides some commentary. In the model an activist that enters into a cooperative engagement with a firm is privy to private information about the firm that could be useful to it in confrontation. “The firm could be concerned that the cooperative wing of the activist would reveal (what it knew) to the confrontational wing ... (therefore) the firm could be unwilling to enter into a cooperative engagement with an activist with both capabilities. An activist with both capabilities then would have to construct a firewall between its two sides,” (page 23). Furthermore a dual-skilled activist can never deliver a better outcome than can two separate single-skilled ones.

Empirical investigation of which tactics ‘work’ in achieving changes in corporate behavior is also an area ripe for new work. King and Soule (2007) is an early example, showing that activist protests can hurt target stock prices, at least temporarily, though that effect depends crucially on the induced level of media coverage of the protest. Space precludes a fuller survey of this part of the literature here, but the interested reader is encouraged to read the excellent overview provided by Eesley, Decelles and Lenox (2016).

While we have focused here on private politics, reflecting the focus of much of the most influential work in this area, public politics, and in particular the interaction of private and public politics are also areas that deserve much more investigation. In their recent contribution Egorov and Harstad (2017) develop a dynamic model of private politics using a ‘war of attrition’ model. An important insight of their work is the codependence of the activist group and the public

regulator. Each would rather the other would incur the costs and take the first step in ‘regulating’ the polluting firm so end up in something akin to a stand-off.¹⁵ More generally, we believe the theoretical and empirical investigation of how private regulation and public regulation coexist and interact is likely to grow, and to deliver important new insights.¹⁶

4. Competition and Collaboration

Because SMOs are often compared to other organizations that share similar purposes, they compete with those comparable organizations for limited resources. SMOs depend on the voluntary efforts of their constituents as well as financial donations, physical space, and public attention. Inasmuch as politicians and cultural influencers have a limited capacity to listen to SMOs, they also compete for attention. Getting on the public agenda is itself a highly competitive process, wherein SMOs must lobby for attention from media outlets by outperforming one another in the public space (King, Bentele, and Soule 2007). Once they have a seat at the table, they may compete with other SMOs to shape the policy agenda, ultimately losing influence if they cannot provide information or symbolic resources that policymakers find useful.

The notion of having a ‘seat at the table’ is a loose one, and the process of agenda-setting, and capturing the attention of politicians, the public and others, is something that could certainly benefit from more rigorous thinking using economic tools.¹⁷

Competition among SMOs occurs among the organizations that work in the same policy domain or arena of social change. McCarthy and Zald (1977) refer to this area of policy pursuit as the *social movement industry* inasmuch as it operates much like any industry in the for-profit sector.

¹⁵ By endogenizing the sequence of moves in such a game, Egorov and Harstad (2016) can be seen as generalizing - at least in this dimension - models such as Lyon and Salant (2017) in which an NGO (private regulator) moves first, followed by a public regulator, and Daubanes and Rochet (2017) in which that sequence is reversed. In Heyes and Oestreich (2017) social pressure is jointly produced by an NGO and a public regulator, with the latter having primary control over the detection of polluting behavior, the NGO in influencing the ‘social atmosphere’ into which information about non-compliance by firms is released.

¹⁷ We have already noted that Heyes et al (2017) develop a model of ‘salience’, in which a citizenry has limited attention, and believe development of further models under that assumption - and relatedly with attention-limited politicians - would be very useful.

SMOs in the same industry seek to mobilize the same group of adherents, influence a similar set of policymakers, or have the same types of targets in mind. Competition is most intense among SMOs in the same industry that also have overlapping goals, tactics, and geography (Minkoff 1997). SMOs that highly overlap may be somewhat redundant, providing the same purpose to constituents in the same locale and carrying out their missions in much the same way. Competition due to high overlap may lead SMOs to seek to differentiate themselves from one another, pursuing new tactics or even cutting back on the tactics they use and becoming more of a specialist. SMOs that compete with a resourceful generalist SMO are actually more likely to specialize their tactics in the future (Soule and King 2008).

Tactical and goal overlap also creates opportunities for collaboration. In fact, research has shown that SMOs that compete with one another also have positive spillover effects that mutually benefit both organizations (Meyer and Whittier 1994). The positive spillover may partly result from increased opportunities for collaboration that come from having tactical or mission overlap. Olzak and Uhrig (2001), for example, showed that New Social Movement organizations in Europe – movements typically associated with identity formation rather than political agitation – had positive spillover effects on the number of protests held each year by women’s SMOs in Europe. They found that spillover was intensified among organizations in which there was high tactical overlap. Thus, movements that overlapped in resource space also learned from one another and drew on momentum created by protests and other activities of closely situated organizations.

Other scholars have argued that competition and conflict within SMOs can actually create the potential for spin-off organizations, inasmuch as resources generated by one SMO can easily be transferred to another if organizational constituents seek to differentiate themselves (Minkoff 1997). Although these new organizations may compete in the future, they may also at times be collaborators, sharing resources and ideas with one another across organizational boundaries. In fact, recent research shows that the tactical and cultural similarity of SMOs is one of the main drivers of SMO collaboration (Jung et al 2014).

Relational approaches to social movement research emphasize the extent to which collaboration takes the form of increased network connectedness among SMOs (Diani and McAdam 2003). Social networks are a useful way to conceive of social movements inasmuch as each SMO represents a node in a larger network of interlinked SMOs. These networks define the boundary of a social movement industry, thus providing the structure through which future competition and collaboration may take place (Diani 1992). Moreover, Baldassari and Diani (2007) argued that clusters of network activity in a social movement indicate where there are strong identity ties between SMOs (i.e., those who conceive of themselves in the same way), whereas the network ties that link them to other clusters in the network are purely transactional. Although Baldassari and Diani do not suggest this, it is possible that transactional collaboration between SMOs is meant to reduce the potential competition between SMOs that have similar identities. If SMOs tend to compete the most intensely with other SMOs that are the most like them, they may seek to offset that competition by forming collaborative (yet purely transactional) relationships with more dissimilar SMOs that still have resources they need for their survival.

While most economic models of activist NGOs and private politics have embedded a *single* NGO, others have allowed for the existence of multiple NGOs (some of which we have already cited) which lead to important questions about the ‘market structure’ of the activist sector. This offers a fruitful area for future research, and one in which economists have at their disposal a well-developed tool kit. Some real world phenomena known to be important depend upon the existence of more than one NGO. For example, the concept of ‘good cop, bad cop’ (the basis for the collection of practitioner papers in Lyon (2010), and modeled formally by Baron (2012)). A ‘business-friendly’ NGO such as WWF may be better placed to strike a deal with a polluting firm when the negotiations occur in the shadow of a more aggressively-minded NGO lurking outside should the deal fail. Relatedly the radical flank only exists with respect to the mainstream (Yaziji and Doh 2009; Schifeling and Hoffman 2017). In these cases it is the *portfolio* of NGOs in existence that matters, not just the characteristics of any individual.

Conventional IO theory offers powerful tools that can be applied here. Furthermore the more recent emergence of ‘theory of networks’, increasingly applied by economists in many applied areas, could provide even more nuanced insights. In a network model the connections between

players (say NGOs) matter, how they are located and joined to each other, not simply their existence (see Jackson 2008, for an excellent introduction with applications).

5. Birth and Survival

An important consequence of the competitive and collaborative processes between SMOs is the founding of new organizations and the mortality of existing ones. The birth and survival of SMOs is at the heart of a social movement's trajectory. When a social movement thrives, more resources become available for the cause and new SMOs emerge to use them. When a social movement is on the wane, resources become scarcer, competition becomes more intense, and the mortality rate of SMOs increases.

An important observation from research on SMOs is that as new resources become available to a movement, founding rates tend to increase dramatically but as the number of SMOs in that social movement industry reaches its carrying capacity, founding rates begin to decline and mortality rates increase (Minkoff 1997). Thus, one can predict the rates of SMO founding and mortality based on the density of SMOs in a given social movement industry. Increased founding rates partly reflect the opening up of new movement resources by other SMOs. As new civil rights organizations emerged in the 1960s, they created a wave of conscious movement adherents who wanted to take the lessons they learned in the civil rights movement and apply them to other causes they cared about, such as the advancement of equal rights for women or putting an end to the Vietnam War. As a result, the founding of new civil rights organizations throughout the United States actually created a resource space that spurred the founding of new SMOs in other arenas of social life as well.

Resource availability is also affected by exogenous conditions, including the state of the economy. Soule and King (2008) found that in times of economy prosperity, SMOs of all types tended to flourish, but during times of economic hardship the most vulnerable SMOs had lower survival rates. Specialist SMOs were especially prone to fail during periods of economic scarcity. The analysis suggests that even though SMOs may create resource availability for one another, they are also dependent on resource availability at the societal level.

The birth of new SMOs is also a function of the broader discursive environment and the presence of political opportunities. New SMOs tend to emerge in response to perceived grievances and the appearance of new discourse about how society should be. In other words, SMOs form in response to perceived needs in the social and political environment. As Zald and Ash (1966: 327) hypothesized, SMOs emerge in response to the “ebb and flow of sentiment in the larger society.” Carmichael, Jenkins, and Brulle (2012), for example, show that the founding of new environmental SMOs increased significantly as air pollution became seen as a public problem and as new allies appeared in Congress and the White House who encouraged environmental protection. The rush of environmental SMO foundings that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s reflected new public awareness and concern about environmental problems. Even though these problems had existed for some time, it was the focused public attention on the issue that led environmental activists to create SMOs to seek environmental solutions.

Thus, an important dynamic shaping the birth and death of SMOs is the overall amount of public attention that society pays to a given issue (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). SMOs, of course, control to some degree the fate of a movement inasmuch as they can help generate that attention. Protests and other social movement tactics are designed, at least in part, to drive attention to their cause and create demand for social and political responses (Lipsky 1968). The fate of a movement hinges on the ability of SMOs to successfully carve out sufficient attention space in the public sphere to guarantee a need for their survival in the future. That public attention to differing issues is something likely to be endogenous, and something that strategically sophisticated green activists can seek to manipulate is recognized in Heyes, Lyon and Martin (2018), with interesting implications.

Economists capture the birth and death of organizations by entry and exit, with entry and exit modeled as a conscious choice. In IO firms may - depending on entry conditions or how ‘contestable’ the industry is - enter an industry or activity, attracted by excess profits being earned by incumbents. Similarly firms leave if they are unable to make the return they could make if they were to move into other lines of business. That process is essential to the efficiency claims made for the allocation of effort and factors of production in market-organized

economies. Some recent models of NGOs have explicitly treated entry to and exit from the ‘market’ for environmental activism and further development of this strand of work could deliver exciting insights. Heyes and Martin (2015, 2018) and Verider and Aldashev (2010) are examples of existing models that do just that, featuring NGOs locating in abstract circular ‘issue spaces’. Such spatial modeling also throws up the possibility of NGOs engaging in spatial preemption to discourage entry, in similar spirit to the behavior of firms in markets for branded or horizontally-differentiated products (Judd 1985).

6. Relationships with Corporations

Just as understanding relationships *between* NGOs is an area where many research opportunities remain, so too is understanding not just conflict but also cooperative relationships between NGOs and firms. Interestingly, this is the area of research in which economic and sociological approaches to NGOs have intermingled the most. The area of research known as nonmarket strategy – which examines how firms actively manage the political and societal aspects of their business environment – includes research that crosses the boundaries between economics, sociology, political science, and management research (Baron and Diermeier 2007; Briscoe, Leitzinger, and King, 2018). Much of this research seeks to explain how firms and NGOs (or SMOs, depending on the language used) interact, sometimes in a conflictual way and in other instances cooperatively (for reviews of this literature see, Doh et al., 2012; Mellahi et al., 2016; Dorobantu et al., 2017).

The potential for partnership between NGOs and firms, despite differences in objectives, is an important one in many real world settings. Using the term ‘frenemies’, Odziemkowska (2018) reports her project to assemble and interrogate a database of NGO/firm partnerships, which is the sort of exercise that could inspire future empirical analysis.

Being a target of hostile action by an environmental activist can be regarded as forming a relationship of sorts. Some effort has been devoted to understanding empirically how activist organizations select their targets (for examples Eesley, Decelles and Lenox 2016; Lenox and Eesley 2009; Bartley and Child 2014; King and McDonnell 2015). Lenox and Eesley, for

instance, exploit a unique dataset of environmental activist campaigns against firms in the United States from 1988 to 2003 and use observable characteristics of firms to predict what sorts of firms are most likely to be targets. Sociological accounts of targeting of firms emphasize the activists' strategic purpose to create publicity for their cause, which leads them to target firms that are highly visible and susceptible to media attention (King and McDonnell 2015). As Bartley and Child (2014: 673) say, social movement activists "force particular kinds of actors into the spotlight and make them focal points for the redress of grievances and enforcement of rights."

Much research in this area focuses on the consequences of NGO and corporate interactions. For example, scholars have tried to understand how firms and investors respond to boycotts (King 2008; 2011) and protests (King and Soule 2007; Yue, Ingram, and Rao 2010), and activist campaigns (Delmas and Toffel 2008; Bartley and Child 2011).¹⁸ Other research has emphasized the unintended consequences of NGO/activist pressure placed on corporations, including the legitimation and spread of new environmental practices (Lounsbury 2001; Lee and Lounsbury 2015). For example, firms that have faced boycotts tend to subsequently increase their levels of prosocial activity (McDonnell and King 2013), experience a decline in political support from politicians and government agencies (McDonnell and Werner 2016), and are more likely to implement internal mechanisms for enhancing corporate social responsibility (McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015).

But the relationship between activist and firm does not have to be limited to predator and prey. Observation of recent practice by some leading NGOs is that partnering with large corporations is an increasingly popular approach to trying to effect change (Chakravorti 2015). For example, at time of writing the formal partnerships it has with Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. and The Coca Cola Company feature prominently on the webpages of WWF (www.worldwildlife.org). As McDonnell, King and Soule (2015) demonstrate, firms that face significant activist pressure in the past tend to become more responsive to activists in the future, in part because they develop internal mechanisms for improving stakeholder relationships. Activists networks are even likely

¹⁸ Although protests are single events, campaigns consist of multiple tactics and extend over a longer period of time as activists coordinate their efforts against a corporate target or industry.

to thrive inside companies, especially when corporate leadership is ideological aligned with their ideals (Briscoe, Chin, and Hambrick 2014). Thus, it appears that past conflict between activists and companies actually paves the way for future engagement with NGOs.

Moreover, there is much evidence to indicate that NGOs have become a stabilizing force in the ecosphere of corporations, creating mechanisms for voluntary and private regulation (Maxwell, Lyon, and Hackett 2000). Activist groups and NGOs collaborate corporations to create rating systems, certifications, and ecolabels (Delmas and Toffel 2008; Lyon and Shimshack 2015) that help keep firms accountable to emerging environmental standards, while also giving companies a means to publicly broadcast their commitment to those norms. Evidence indicates that environmental rating systems have a real impact on firm financial performance, especially when triggered by activist protests and shareholder resolutions (Vasi and King 2012). Thus, inasmuch as firms and NGOs partner to create voluntary means of regulation, it becomes a crucial mechanism for enforcing environmental norms, as well as spreading new beliefs and ideological resources that help legitimate environmental practices (Lee and Lounsbury 2015).

7. Conclusions

Economists and sociologists have been theorizing and investigating empirically the formation, behavior and impacts of environmental activist groups for many years. Researchers from both traditions have made great progress in illuminating the many fascinating positive and normative questions that naturally arise in this area. Notwithstanding this, much remains to be done, and this should remain an exciting and fertile research agenda for scholars into the future.

Further, we hope that we have emphasized that there is a great degree of overlap in the way in which researchers from the two disciplines think about environmental activism and its organization. Though the language and emphases sometimes vary, sociologists have conceived and developed rational-actor explanations of social movements, which dovetails naturally with how economists organize their thoughts about this (and all other!) areas of inquiry. What is striking to a reader of both strands of literature should be how *similar* the two disciplines are in their overall understanding of the SMO/NGO space.

Despite that, the benefits to deeper collaboration and cross-pollination between the two strands could be substantial. To return to Gibbons (2005) the richness of much of the sociological study in this area - and more broadly - suggest potential new independent and dependent variables, for inclusion in both theoretical and econometric work. These include concepts such as identity, legitimacy and salience, traditionally overlooked by economists but undoubtedly central concepts in understanding activism. Sociologists can learn from the tighter mapping from explanatory to outcome variables that the discipline that economic methodologies (such as game theory, principal-agency theory) typically impose on the researcher. For example, how and when does an SMO enter a field and when do they choose to overlap with existing entities? Exactly how does being a member of an NGO provide value for individuals from an identity perspective, and how might that inform the ‘design’ and/or behavior of an NGO?

We have pointed throughout the essay to specific gaps that exist in what we know. Among the important opportunities for future research that draw from both perspectives are; (1) Operationalizing alternative notions of identity consistent with insights from sociology, embedding them in economic models of activism and drawing out implications for NGO design and behavior. (2) Rigorous empirical investigation of the effective (as distinct from fiat) objective functions of green NGO, recognizing that those may diverge from stated objectives. (3) Formal empirical (to include case study and experimental) analysis of donor preferences regarding not just outcomes, but the means used to obtain those outcomes (“procedural utility”). (4) Using formal game theoretic methods to deepen our understanding of the choice of tactics by an NGO from a menu of possibilities, as well as analyzing the positive and normative implications of alternative NGO tactics or instruments when used *in combination*. (5) Developing models of NGOs that explicitly treat entry to and exit from the activity of environmental activism. (6) Further developing our understanding of competition and collaboration *within* the NGO sector focusing on the positive and normative implications of alternative *portfolios* of NGOs. Relatedly, (7) deepening our theoretical and empirical understanding of NGO-Corporate partnerships, where they arise and what they achieve.

The influence of green activism on how firms behave with respect to the natural environment is profound. Our understanding of the positive and normative dimensions of that influence is incomplete, which makes this an appealing area for research in the next several years. Scholars from both economics and sociology have done much to advance what we understand of the organization of the sector. Connecting insights from the two disciplines should make for a richer and more nuanced comprehension.

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